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'The Great Hypocrite': A Way Out

RONALD REAGAN, past master of diversion, desperately needs one now.

For the last three months, he has been leaping from crisis to crisis, moving so fast that none of them caught up with him until now.

The election campaign, which was portrayed by loyalists as a gallant rescue mission for wounded Republican senators, was really more of a flight. As long as he was on the stump, pumping Star Wars, damning Democrats, he was safe from the embarrassments that were in hot pursuit.

He's been on the run since the awful October surprise of the story of the White House "disinformation" campaign against Libya. That was outdistanced by the collapse of the Reykjavik summit, which also helped take attention away from the crash of the Hasenfus plane in Nicaragua, and the continuing awkwardness of having the real story about Reykjavik come from Mikhail Gorbachev.

Finally, though, he had to stop. He came back to the White House and, on Election Day, to a scandal so awful that it wiped out all the others. The scourge of world terror, we learned was dealing with the Ayatollah Khomeini.

And what can he do now?

It has to be something radical. Radical for him would be a press conference. But he hates press conferences—he's had none for three months—and confession is not his gig. A

question-and-answer session might force an admission that the mighty, unique United States is just like other countries. Like France, for instance, which straightforwardly put a billion

dollars on the barrelhead for Syria and got its hostages back.

After being hit with a few quotes from old speeches, he might have to admit that he is like other men when they are held up by gangsters. He might have to concede that in certain respects, he is even like Jimmy Carter.

He might also be badgered into conceding that the war against terrorism, of which he was self-appointed generalissimo, has been lost.

As he reads his universally bad notices, the president may reflect that if he had gotten all the hostages home, he would not now be hammered and derided as the "Great Hypocrite."

Americans share his passion for happy endings. They would have cheered to see Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland, both of whom have been held for going on two years, being folded into the embrace of their families. The price, monstrous as it was, might have receded somewhat in the joy.

But only a pale, anguished David Jacobsen made it to the White House photo opportunity. Three others have been seized despite the shipments of spare parts and weapons. To the unmanageable is added the indigestible: Reagan did business with the world's number one terrorist nation—and got taken.

A press conference would offer only a limited opportunity to embellish the geopolitical curlicue offered first by Robert McFarlane, leader of the merry band of instant Irishmen—the Iranians say they were all carrying fake Irish passports—who landed in Teheran last May. The big picture is that they were serving the national interest by making friends with "moderate elements" in the Ayatollah's government. That was like looking for a John Bircher in the liberal Americans for Democratic Action, and some newly emboldened scribe might point it out.

So the press conference is out. How about something cosmic, something that would alter the current conversation in a major

way. How about an arms-control diversion? He could announce he had reconsidered the Soviet offer of Reykjavik and was ready to sign an agreement.

But he doesn't want to do that, either. So what's left?

All that's left is to abolish the National Security Council.

The president must have noticed that the process-fanciers in town have been clucking about bypassing the government agencies usually charged with the execution of foreign policy. With straight faces, people have been lamenting the initial story about exclusion of the CIA—as if the agency that gave us the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors would have lent a little reason to the Iranian madness.

The Republic prospered for more than 150 years without an NSC. Since its inception in 1947, the NSC has done little but torment secretaries of state. Zbigniew Brzezinski bragged about thwarting Cyrus Vance. Under Reagan, the NSC has reached new depths, functioning with the worst features of a Roman emperor's household guard and the Plumbers of the Nixon years.

The president should say that from now on, he will manage foreign policy with the secretary of state, who must testify in Congress, and operate in the open. When a House committee called Oliver North, of Reagan's NSC, to ask him about his direction of the secret war in Nicaragua from inside the White House, they were turned down. As to the investigations that the Democrats are planning, Donald Regan is already growling "executive privilege."

Reagan can't get rid of the Iranian disgrace, but he can do away with the NSC and give people something else to talk about.

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